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ABSTRACT

As an interesting development in recent literary criticism, reader response can enhance a composition class in many ways. Reader response, by incorporating both intellect and feeling into an aesthetic reaction to literature, restores the subjective aspect that some forms of criticism deny. Three main elements compose the repeated cycle of a reader-response composition class: (1) individual readers respond to the literature in the written form of a reader's journal; (2) group discussion validates individuals' insights, with the class acting as an interpretive community; and (3) students produce essays through a process of drafting and peer review. In the final essay-writing step, the class community--not the teacher--is seen as the audience, and student writing becomes the text to be read and given a response. The reading journal and reader-response discussion help identify issues that students can explore more fully and formally in their essays. Because the reader-response model insures that individual responses are listened to and respected, it encourages involvement as readers and commitment as writers, and it discourages conformity of thought and the tendency to parrot the teacher's interpretations. (Figures of the authoritarian model and reader-response model are included, and a list of instructions for a reader's journal is appended.) (MM)

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# READER RESPONSE IN THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

Reader response is one of the most interesting recent developments in literary criticism. I'd like to explain how its principles can undergird and enhance a composition class. For the past three years I have been using a reader-response approach in all my literature classes, with good results. The course this paper concerns is ENC 1101, a required freshman composition course in writing about literature.

Before explaining the method, I'll briefly review the concept of reader response, which has been articulated and developed by a number of people--Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Jonathan Culler, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser, to name a few. The chief characteristic of reader-response criticism is just what the name implies: it begins with the reader's response to a work of literature. The response is an aesthetic one, incorporating both intellect and feeling. Reader response restores the subjective element that some other forms of criticism deny. It recognizes that the reader has an active role in making sense of a literary text. It also recognizes the existence of a community of readers, who

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may or may not agree in their interpretations of a literary work. A reading community, such as a college composition class, works as a group by exchanging individual perceptions and discussing their merits. While the group sometimes attains a shared interpretation, just as often it acknowledges the plausibility of several different readings of the same text. Inevitably the individual members find their conception of the work enlarged as they hear others' responses.

The reader-response composition class carries on its work by a repeated process or cycle composed of three main elements:

1. Individual readers respond to the literature. In my classes, this response takes the written form of a reader's journal; topics are shown in the appendix.

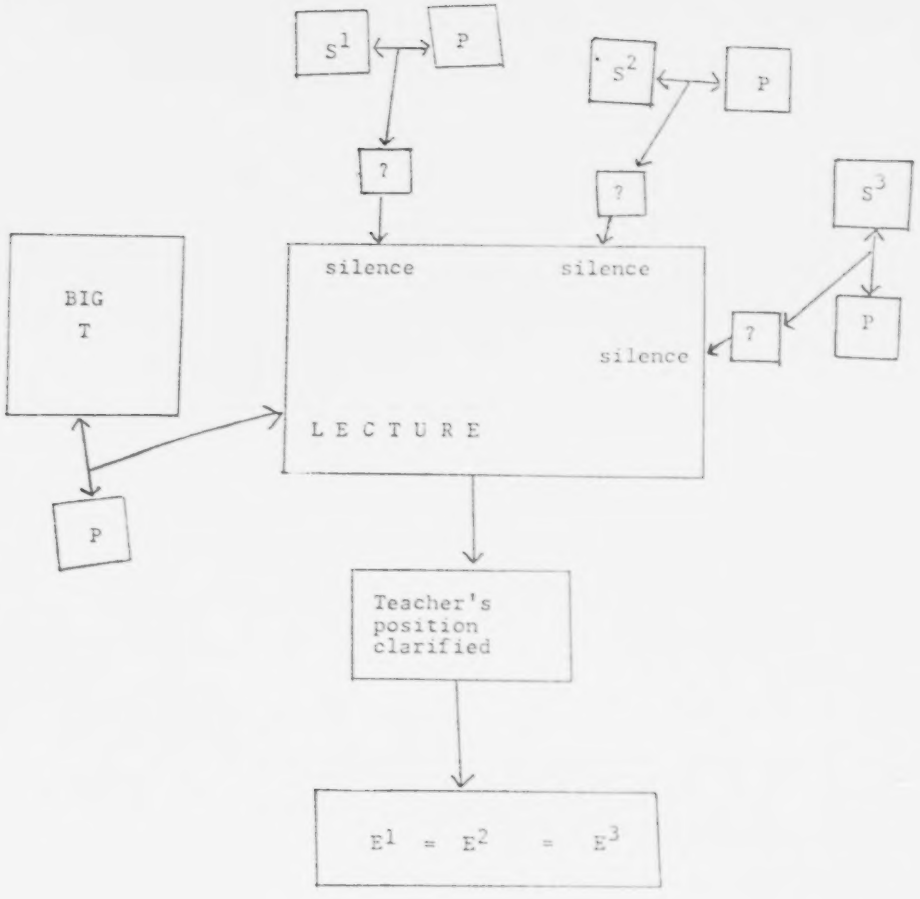
2. Group discussion valorizes individuals' insights, with the class acting as an interpretive community.

3. Students produce essays through a process of drafting and peer review.

In the essay-writing step (3), the community--not the teacher alone--is seen as the audience, and student writing becomes the text to be read and responded to. Figure 2 charts the reader-response composition process, contrasting it with the more traditional lecture model diagramed in Figure 1.

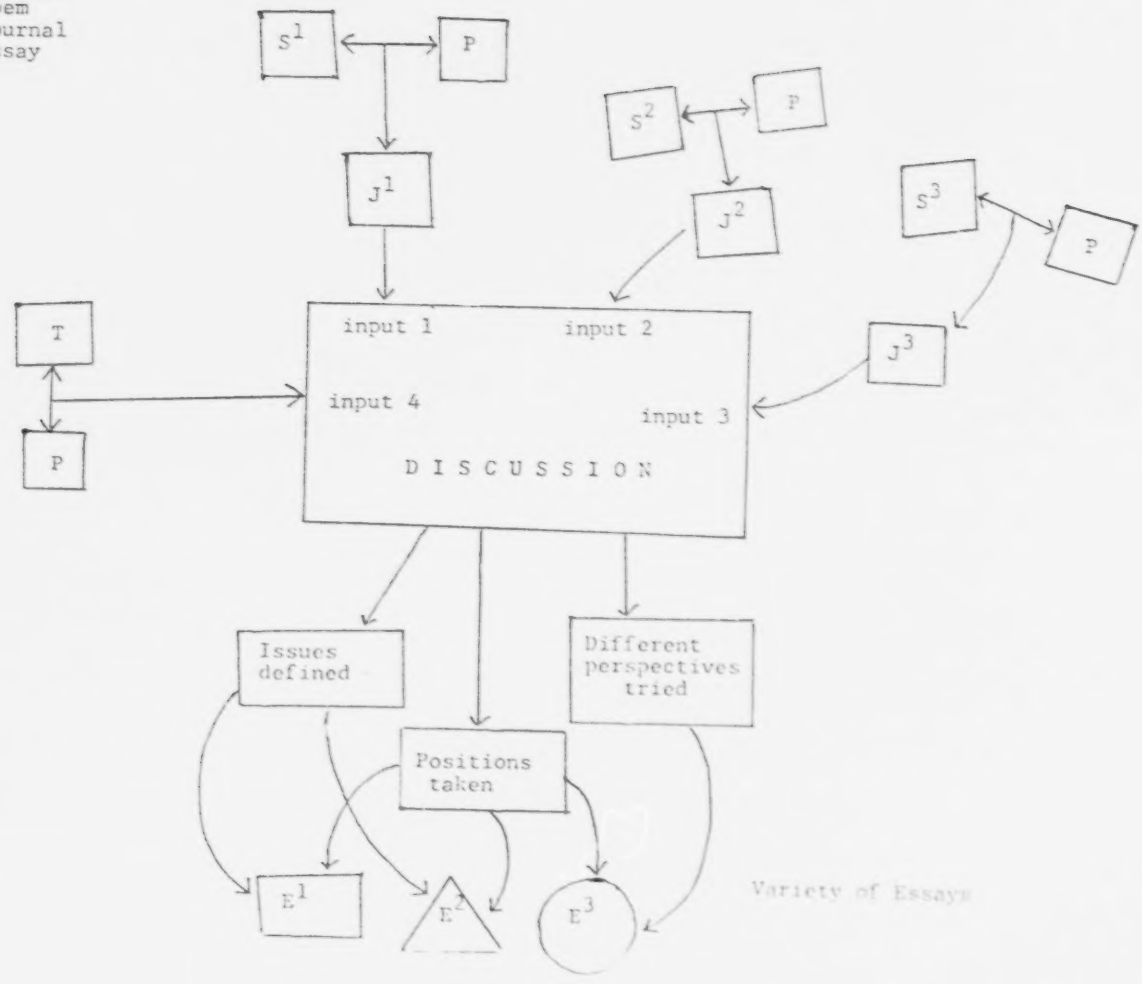
S student
T teacher
P poem
E essay

Fig. 1 AUTHORITARIAN MODEL



S student
T teacher
P poem
J journal
E essay

Fig. 2 READER-RESPONSE MODEL



Some obvious benefits of the reader-response approach in a college composition class may be noted. Because this method insures that individual responses are listened to and respected, it encourages involvement as readers and commitment as writers. Likewise, it discourages conformity of thought and the tendency to parrot the teacher's interpretations.

I'd like to explain each stage in more detail. First, and most important from a reader-response standpoint, is the journal, which is written during or just after the time spent reading a poem, story, play, or novel. In the journal, students record their initial responses to the work--what they like and dislike about it, what they find puzzling, events that remind them of a past experience, how they feel toward a character, anything which evokes feelings of anger, sadness, admiration, pleasure, disagreement, approval. The journal invites students to ask questions and seek the answers; it gives them a place safe from the red pen to work out an understanding of their responses and of the literature that gave rise to these reactions.

The journal helps prepare students for the next step in the process, discussion by the interpretive community. Having committed their reactions to paper in private, students come to the discussion knowing what they think about the work or at least knowing what questions they want to raise. Their

questions and comments form the basis of the reader-response discussion, which may begin with the question, "What did you write in your journals about this poem?" In keeping with the reader-response assumption that different individuals read the same work differently, the teacher refrains from imposing a certain interpretation or leading the group to a previously determined conclusion. In reader-response criticism, interpretive authority resides in the community of readers, not in an authority figure such as the instructor or a professional critic; opinions are expressed freely and received with open minds. While there may be vigorous debate, the more plausible and satisfying interpretations tend to be valorized by the group, with the result that everyone's store of understanding is enriched. Reader-response discussion maximizes the power of peer interaction in a class; students are relieved to find that others have trouble with the same lines, and they enjoy adding others' insights to their own.

The reading journal and the reader-response discussion help to identify issues that students can explore more fully and formally in their essays. Critical writing is most effective when it arises out of strong reactions to the work of literature. Through peer review, student writers receive helpful feedback on their essay drafts and a further

opportunity to have their ideas challenged. At the same time, they exercise their skills as critical readers by responding to classmates' drafts. Essays, like journal entries, reflect the concerns of their authors and tend to be personal and authentic in voice, but they are more structured and more rigorously argued. Because they are written in the light of ideas brought out in discussion, their authors can anticipate opposing arguments and deal with them persuasively.

I'd like to conclude by telling you about one of the students who has benefitted from the reader-response approach. Tim was an average student in ENC 1102--like many, he had had little previous experience in reading and interpreting literature, but he was conscientious about writing in his journal, and he got along pretty well until about the fifth week when we started reading poetry. Beginning with his entry on "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," he expressed the idea that he was having difficulty.

> When I read this poem it went way over my head. I didn't really understand what it was trying to say.
>
> ("Reason" by Josephine Miles) I had a lot of trouble understanding this poem. Most of it went straight over my head.

(Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer")
This poem was even further over my head than "Reason."
("God's Grandeur" by Hopkins) I'm having a lot of trouble with this poem and I don't think it is my fault . . . Kennedy [the editor] should have revised this poem so that it made some sense.

Such expressions of bafflement are not surprising; what is remarkable is that each of the entries that began this way filled a page or more. How is that possible? Tim didn't give up. After complaining briefly, he set about identifying the trouble spots, asking questions, and making his best guesses. For example, this is how he tackled "God's Grandeur":

A lot of the sayings and words can be taken different ways. In the first line it says, "The world is <u>charged</u> with the grandeur of God." Does that mean charged electrically or accused of something? The next line uses the words shook foil. I don't know what shook foil is. The next line says, "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed." Does crushed oil gather to a greatness? What is crushed oil? I don't know why Hopkins repeats "have trod" over and over. Hopkins has a bad problem with pronoun reference all through this poem.

In such entries as this, Tim was training himself to pay attention to those details of poetry that make it at once hard

to understand and worth the effort. His labor began to yield satisfaction, as we see in his entry on Emily Dickinson's poem, "Because I Could Not Stop For Death":

> I understand the first stanza all right but I'm having trouble with the end of the second stanza where it says, "For His Civility--." Why did the person in the poem put away their labor and leisure for death's civility? Did they feel as if they owed death that? I don't know. The third stanza just emphasizes how long of a journey this person is on with death. But when you get to the beginning of the fourth stanza where it says, "Or rather--He passed Us--" it seems to be contradictory. It seems to me now that instead of them (Death and the person) going on such a long journey it seems that they are standing still and the rest of the things are going past and around them. The rest of stanza four I think is talking about death and is trying to put across to the reader how death feels. Stanza five talks about them stopping in front of a house that was built almost entirely underground. Maybe this house was symbolizing a graveyard and the only part sticking out of the ground was

> the tombstone. The last stanza seems to justify my assumption about the fifth stanza because it says once they stopped at the house the person spent the rest of their eternity there. Maybe where you get buried is where you will be spending eternity. Once you are there you never leave.

And with that, Tim makes an important discovery about writing:

> I've been finding out that while I write in my journal about these poems it helps me come up with possible explanations and assumptions about the poems thus helping me understand them. I start writing not having any idea what the poem is trying to say and by the time I'm finished I've come up with answers to most of my questions. It helps me enjoy the poems more. By the way, I liked this poem even though it does talk about death which is usually depressing. This poem gave me a different point of view in which to look at death and possibly understand it better.

Tim went on to write an essay about "Because I Could Not Stop For Death," arguing that Emily Dickinson's view of death differs from the common view in a number of ways. While this thesis may not seem strikingly original to those familiar with Dickinson, it is significant in that it was achieved through Tim's own efforts as a responding reader.

There have been many Tims. Though not all of them describe their progress in such clear terms, many have written a note at the end of the journal or on their course evaluation forms telling me in one way or another that the reader-response journal has been valuable and has made a difference in their writing, in the confidence with which they approach literature, and in the enjoyment they receive from it.

## Appendix: A Reader's Journal

Use the journal as a place to record your reactions to the readings and to what is said in class, and as a place to explore ideas that you will use in your essays. You can complete the 40-page requirement by writing three to four pages per week and responding to every assigned reading. Attach this page inside your journal, and use these suggested topics when you need a starting point for your writing.

1. Tell how you feel toward this work or this author, and why.

2. Write about any difficulties or frustrations involved in reading this work.

3. Write about something you don't understand; try to write your way to an answer.

4. Write about the way this work confirms or confronts your beliefs.

5. Write about something in this work that reminds you of someone you know or of something that has happened in your life.

6. Describe what it felt like to read this work, what sort of experience it was.

7. Write about an idea expressed in the work (or in class) which you agree or disagree with.

8. Write about what is effective in the way the work is written.

9. Explore a social or ethical issue raised by the work; judge the behavior of the characters, or the views of the author, as right or wrong.

10. Interpret a work or a part of it; tell what it means and why you think it means that; explain the work's overall significance or message.

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11. Compare things: how are two works (or two characters, themes, authors, etc.) alike and different?

12. Write about something new you learned from reading the work.

13. Write about something that surprised you, angered you, delighted you, or evoked any strong reaction as you were reading the work. Write about anything that stays on your mind after reading.

14. In what ways does this work reflect its time, its literary period, or the personality of its author?

15. How would you go about making this work more accessible to readers of today?

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Fig. 1: AUTHORITARIAN MODEL

S student
T teacher
P poem
E essay

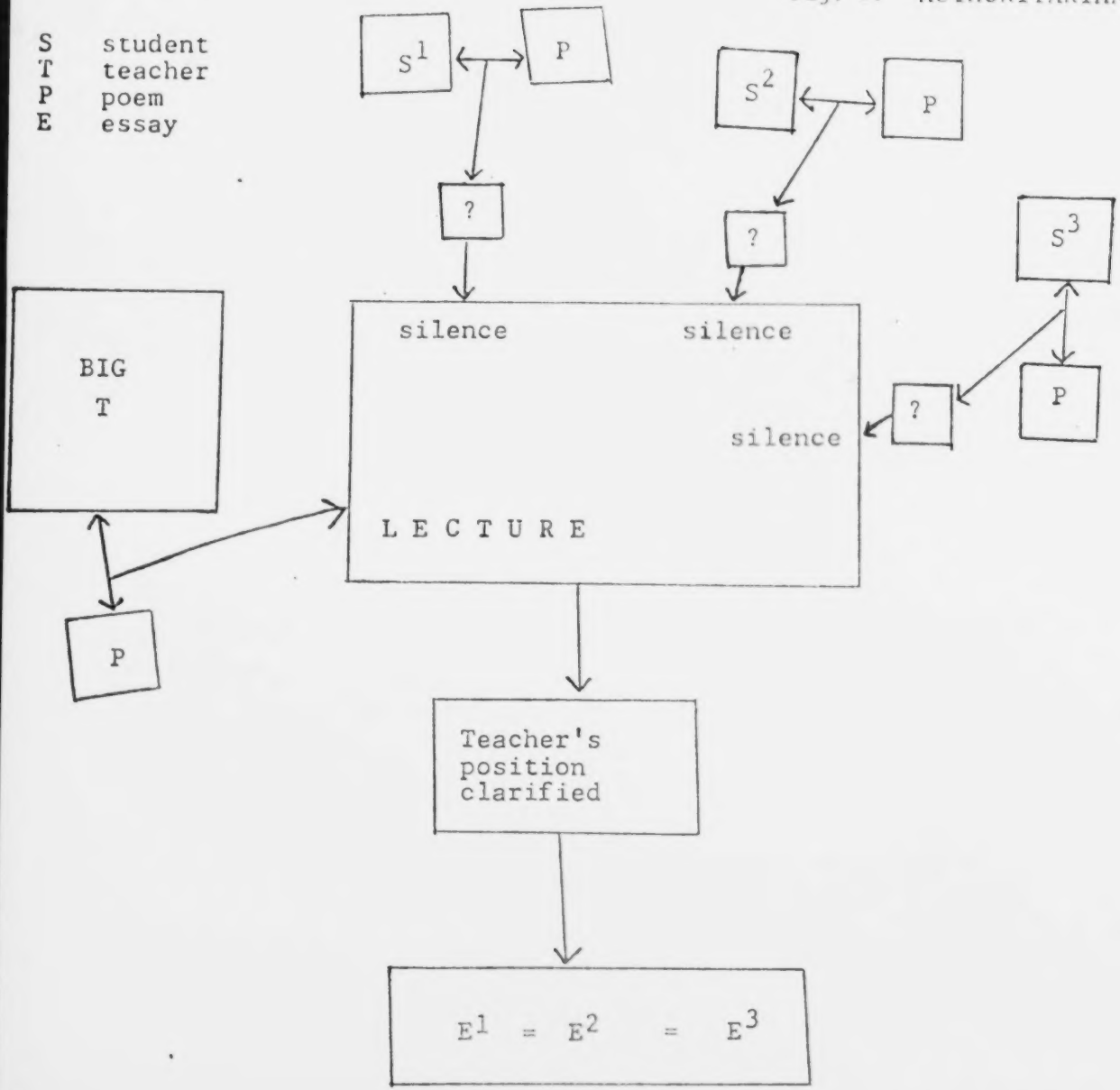

Fig. 2: READER-RESPONSE MODEL